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Paper by W.D. Albright, Superintendent, Dominion Experimental Station, Beaverlodge, Alberta, before the Soils Group of the C.S.T.A., Olds, Alberta. June, 1942.

Nearly twenty-nine years ago I homesteaded in the Peace-River region of Northern Alberta. I would not advise my sons to do likewise, and having been raised in the region, neither of them was at all likely to follow my example. They could size up the disadvantages too well.

My own homesteading was not too bad. I found an abandoned quarter in a district that had been settled more than four years and was able to prove it up by breaking fifty acres instead of thirty, while residing on purchased land within nine miles. I was married and lived close to store, post office, church and school, with a regular mail service. I kept my health and skirted some of the worst hazards, so my homestead was good value at the \$10 entry fee. It[^] too often otherwise.

Many are less fortunate. They go far from post office and store, perhaps take a bushy quarter, perchance meet sickness or disaster and get "homesteaditis" proving up. Neighbors are few and far between; roads are a problem; marketing is expensive, and when they come to marry they perhaps take Punch's advice or else make a Hobson's choice. As a means of wasting economic and human resources an uncontrolled homestead policy takes first rank.

New land should be an asset to the state. As we have developed it, the frontier has been a liability, with a fringe of scattered population difficult to serve administratively, commercially and professionally. Railroads have to be subsidized. Highways are poor and costly per capita.

What Homesteaders Want.

During the past quarter century I have received hundreds of letters from prospective land seekers. Among the commonest questions is, "Where can I get a homestead near a school, church, store, elevator, doctor, etc.?" The answer is that "there isn't any such animal."

Under an unrestricted homestead policy settlers trickled into new districts, competing with each other in distance and privation for the choice of location. Not only had the bonafide land seekers to compete with each other but they must also compete with the professional homesteader, whose idea was to prove up a piece of land, sell it and move on. The first settlers in the Grande Prairie district trekked 550 miles with oxen for the glorious privilege of homesteading and filling South African veteran's script.

What Homesteaders Find.

Arrived at rainbow's end, one homesteader settles here for some good or whimsical reason; another settles two or three miles away, and so on. Roads are lacking; winter trails are kept open with difficulty; stores are scarce and crude; doctors and nurses, if available at all, have to be bonused, markets are far away, but the new settlers set blithely to work to break, fence, build, sink wells, etc., all at excessive cost. Gradually other settlers come in and homestead among them. By the time the first ones have proven up some of them have got disgusted with conditions, are broken in health, or have again developed the wanderlust, so they pull up stakes and move out, leaving the later arrivals still facing the ordeal of scattered settlement.

The only thing that keeps the first settlers going at all is the capital brought in by the later arrivals. When the ratio of incoming settlement to production falls off hard times ensue.

It is problematical how soon a school may be established. It is more problematical how soon transportation may come within hailing distance. If there is a boom on it may be within two or three years. If war, hard times or other factors intervene, the pioneer stage may be dragged out fifteen or twenty years.

Economic Waste.

Meantime the settlers suffer. Policemen, tax collectors, homestead inspectors, drummers, lecturers, missionaries and many others trundle about over the rough trails at high cost to reach the scattered population. The settler and the general taxpayer carry the load of all this waste, the settlers paying in privation and hardship, rather than in sound value, for the privilege of virgin opportunity. This is sheer waste. And then we wonder why the citizens of a rich, new country like Canada should be tax-ridden and hard-up! Our wits are where?

"Homesteaditis"

The waste of material resources is not the greatest evil. The waste of human resources is more important--the lack of education and culture, the impairment of health and vigour, the contraction of mental outlook, the depression of spirit--all the compound effects connoted by the term "homesteaditis".

Just one example: twenty-three years ago a lumber-jack homesteaded on a high hill-top six miles north-east of the Beaverlodge Experimental Station. It was reached by a break-neck trail and once the family got in the wife seldom got out. Little crop could be raised but potatoes and vegetables. Three years the family lived on that lofty look-out, inspired by the scenery but not much else. During those three years the family of five or six children never went to school. One girl died. Finally the wife got so fed-up that she persuaded her husband to leave. Eventually, they went back to Ontario, where the father died. One boy joined the American Navy and deserted. The family is now broken up. Their ill-fated venture proved a tragedy. In their case it was not so much distance as inaccessibility and unsuitable land. Their reverted homestead is now part of a provincial park, from which one may view a million acres of good land.

"The pioneer spirit", says Col. J.K. Cornwall, "is a fine thing but it should not be allowed to lead men off to some nice creek or high mountain peak on which to starve". Granting the right of a man to immolate himself on the altar of misguided ambition, what about his wife and family? We jail men for less serious crimes than our lumber-jack homesteader unwittingly committed. The good old pioneer days recalled by octogenarians were fine for those who came through all right, but like war it was tough for the casualties.

Sparse Settlement Particularly Bad in the Bush.

Particularly in a wooded region is scattered settlement to be avoided. Experience has repeatedly proven that small clearings in the midst of a northern bush are frost wells, where the struggling settlers' hopes are repeatedly blasted. Larger clearings are much less susceptible.

Water drainage as well as air drainage are often problems in the bush. Extensive clearings facilitate both.

Not only that, but if isolation is bad on the prairie, it is more acute in the bush, where progress in clearing and cropping is so very slow and laborious. It is vastly better to fire-clear the bush land in blocks before settlers are ever permitted to go on it. The clearing need not be one hundred percent. If half the land of each quarter section can be made fit for a power plough before the homesteader takes it up he has a chance to produce, and the settlement to progress at a decent rate.

Experience of Sudeten Colony

The experience of the Sudeten colony at Tupper, B.C., illustrates this point very well. There, in a frosty district, the power plough was put to work three years ago and substantial areas were brought promptly under cultivation. Recent seasons have been kind but the surrounding settlers have been astonished to find how well that tract of land has since escaped the frost hazard. Unpleasant surprises may still be in store but there is every reason to believe that wholesale methods of clearing have been very helpful, and there is good ground for the opinion of the Supervisor, Mr. H.J. Siemens, that although community settlement may be debatable, community organization of settlement holds much promise.

"Our general experience", he says, "indicates great advantages in breaking larger areas at the same time. It appears that grain crops will do much better where the wind and sun can get over the field in contrast to smaller areas where the bush would provide too much shelter. The larger fields also have a distinct advantage in being less exposed to the ravages from bush rabbits and larger game including deer, moose and bear, which are frequently found in bush areas in sufficient numbers to cause serious damage. Apart from these benefits, of course, it is very much more economical to break with power machinery in large areas rather than in small areas. I am referring here to areas of 100 to 200 acres in contrast to 10-to-15-acre fields. From an economic standpoint, in this machinery age, it appears to me as financial suicide for an individual settler to try and break with horses this medium or heavier bush covered land. Community settlement or at least community organization of a settlement is therefore of vital importance".

Four Evils to be Avoided

We have indicated four evils to be avoided in settlement of new lands:

- (1) Scattered occupation;
- (2) Protraction of the pioneer period by irregular occupation;
- (3) The occupation of poor and ill-situated lands;
- (4) Battling single-handed in isolated units in the bush.

Classify the Land

About 1922 I submitted to the Honourable Herbert Greenfield, then Premier of Alberta, a memorandum on "Handling the Natural Resources in the Best Interests of All". In that paper I advocated development of the country along conservation lines and to this end urged classification of the Crown land into three main divisions:-

- (1) Farm land
- (2) Ranching land
- (3) Timber, game and mineral preserves.

The rough land, the land subject to severe erosion, the very poor land, and the land needing to be kept in forest in order to regulate stream flow and to ensure ground-water supplies were to be thrown into the third class.

Ranching lands would include an intermediate class of marginal lands, which might eventually be converted into class I. They would be leased on special terms to ranchers or used for community grazing.

The first class would comprehend the agricultural lands, including the first-class-wooded and perhaps in some cases second-class-wooded lands. They would not, however, include small parcels of good lands in the midst of poor districts.

Three Subdivisions of Class I

The farm lands were to be subdivided as follows:

- (a) Reasonably clear land fairly well situated as to transportation;
- (b) Bush land needing clearing but not conveniently accessible to transportation;
- (c) Land too far from steel and highway.

Immediate settlement would be confined to a, which would be for the time being a hypothetical zone, since good land is already settled too far ahead of steel.

Clear the Bush Ahead of Settlement

The bush lands (b) would be cleared or partially cleared by fire before settlers were allowed to go upon them. Twenty-eight years' experience in the Peace have shown me that even in the driest seasons, spring fires do not hurt the land, other than muskeg (out of which the fire should be kept) for the soil is then cool and is more or less damp with snow moisture.

It is true that spring fires will not run through green timber, and that the summer fires which might consume it are taboo because they injure the soil. It is necessary therefore in clearing green bush to chop or bulldoze fire lanes through before attempting to burn. The first fire may do little good but grass, vetch, and fire-weed grow in the openings and help to carry the next fire a little better. A windy time should be chosen for burning. The fire lanes were to be chopped out by prison and relief labor. It might be a good job now for internes. The firing should, of course, be done in large blocks before any settlers' buildings or crops complicated the operation. To this end squatting should be forbidden. Advantage should be taken of natural water courses to control the fires. Such burning of the bush on agricultural lands would give the best possible protection to the adjacent commercial forest. It need not kill all the trees. It would suffice to prepare half of each quarter for a power plough.

The third subdivision (c) might include a good deal of bush, which might be treated the same as b. Its settlement would await transportation.

When b lands were cleared and the c lands were about to be provided with a railroad these two groups could be converted into a and offered for settlement. The railroad and the Government should cooperate in this.

Ownership Versus Leasehold

In my memorandum I advanced the hypothesis that ultimately no land should be privately owned but that all natural resources should be regarded as common property and leased to those who would use them, the rental accruing as a revenue to society. However, such a policy applying to farm land would need to be very carefully worked out by

experience in order to ensure to the tenant security of tenure and to the State stability of settlement. It would be very important to see that the lessee had a vital interest in developing his property and caring for it to maintain fertility, avoid erosion, keep the land clean, etc. Pending the evolution of such a policy it might be better to preserve temporarily the principle of sale and private ownership of farm lands.

Auction the Land in Blocks with Settlement Conditions

To consolidate settlement and to synchronize the occupation of a given area I suggested auctioning the land quarter by quarter, in blocks, with settlement conditions attached. A substantial down payment should be demanded without any further payments for several years but with a requirement of occupancy within six months and of improvement, the remainder of the price to be amortized in a long-term contract. The down payment insures the State against casual ventures, idle speculation and indolent occupation.

Auctioning has three distinct advantages:

- (1) It adjusts by competition--the fairest known way--the varying prices of varying parcels;
- (2) It assures to the public revenues the maximum value that a newly opened block may be worth in the estimation of buyers at a given time;
- (3) It synchronizes the occupation of a newly opened block by all its settlers.

Might Provide Railroads With the Sale Price of the Land

Let us see how it might work out. Suppose the land had been cleared so that half could be broken with a power plough or perhaps some had been actually broken by the State, or suppose that a railroad was ready to build a line through a block of land, an auction could be called after due notice. First, the proposed town sites should be surveyed and announced, then the town lots could be auctioned to business and professional men preparing to serve the new settlement. Then, or perhaps before the town-lots were sold, the homesteads could be auctioned, subject to an upset price, the sale beginning at the townsite and working outward to the fringe of settlement. Suppose for purpose of calculation the land brought 3 dollars an acre. At that rate the 69,120 acres in a tier of three townships would yield \$207,360., or more than enough to build a railroad across the six-mile breadth of the middle township at \$30,000. per mile. There is reason to believe that \$3. an acre might be exceeded. In 1928 school lands in the Peace sold for a ruling price of fifteen to twenty dollars an acre, although this was too high and it was afterwards in many cases adjusted.

British Columbia and Alberta Changes in Policy

My policy was never adopted in Alberta, although Premier Greenfield and afterwards Premier Brownlee seemed to be impressed by it, and Sir Henry Thornton conveyed the view that it might speed the settlement of the frontier. Some years ago British Columbia adopted a policy designed to consolidate fringe settlements by encouraging the removal of outlying homesteaders to communities closer in. It was a step in the right direction.

In 1939 the present Government of Alberta discontinued the homestead policy and replaced it by an agricultural-lease system involving residence and modest improvements. Where the land is of such a nature that it can be made ready for crop at a cost of less than \$6. per acre, the lessee must break and seed his land according to the following table:

| Year | Acres Broken | Acres Seeded |
|------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1st | 5 | nil |
| 2nd | 10 | 5 |
| 3rd | 10 | 15 |
| 4th | 15 | 25 |
| 5th | 15 | 40 |
| 6th | 25 | 55 |
| 7th | 0 | 80 |

For each succeeding year for the duration of the lease the lessee must seed 80 acres, which, of course, includes necessary summer-fallow.

Where the land is more costly to prepare for crop by reason of brush, timber or other obstacles, the amount to be broken is in proportion to the rate of \$6. per acre.

There are no taxes for the first three crop years; afterwards the lessee is required to pay one-eighth of his crop. The conditions are rather easy and loose but attempt is made to confine settlement to good lands and to enlarge from time to time the areas available for leasehold.

Although well meant, I fear the plan is open to certain criticisms. It gives the State no adequate security; it leaves too much to the discretion of officials and it might easily play into the hands of political interference.

Group Settlement--Village Residence

Much is heard pro and con of group settlement. It has some advantages from the standpoint of congeniality and cohesion but it tends to preserve island communities which do not readily coalesce with our national spirit. From this standpoint they are at least debatable.

Two years ago the Station staff was called in to the Sledoten colony to confer on a plan to bring neighbors' residences closer together than under the prevailing prairie plan of settlement. The most that came of this was the grouping of four neighbors here and there on adjacent corners of their land and even that proved too close in some cases for the frailties of human nature. However, it would seem possible and it may in time become feasible for Western farmers to be grouped in small villages, but such a plan would have to be very carefully evolved and perfected by experience.

Poorer Citizens Else Sounder Policy

Pioneering as we have known it in the past has been a task for strong backs and weak minds. It has given the odds to the classes, races and groups willing to go the furthest, work the hardest and endure the most privation for the choice of opportunity. It has frittered and dissipated economic and human resource; it has made the frontier unattractive to the people we want. We are confronted with the alternative of filling our vacant spaces with a peasant type of people or of so recasting our resettlement policies as to appeal to the class of people we want, making the frontier an asset to the state instead of a drag. The plan set forth aims to consolidate and synchronize settlement, giving the pioneer many of the advantages of established communities within six months of the day he files upon his land. We should gently curb the pioneer spirit without destroying it on the one hand or permitting it, on the other, to make suicidal sacrifice.

Most strongly would I emphasize the wisdom of prescribing methods of land disposal under which the settler has a fair chance to succeed, and, having done that, --leave him alone to make his own way in a spirit of self-reliance instead of leaving the door open to endless clamor through political or other means for clemency, concession and rebate. Let us put pioneer farming on a business basis and keep it there.

Summary

Under a laissez-faire policy of homesteading, the pioneer fringe has been a load on the state, wasting material and human resources, dragging out the pioneer stage and throwing the odds to a peasant type of settler rather than to the intelligent business-like type which stipulates decent social conditions and a reasonable standard of living.

The land-seeker pays in privation and hardship for the privilege of virgin opportunity.

Scattered, irregular entry and the throwing open of poor and ill-situated lands have been three main contributing causes, being especially disadvantageous in the bush.

These evils could be controlled by gently restraining the pioneer instinct, without destroying it.

The Crown lands should first be classified with a view to development along broad lines of conservation policy.

Bushlands should be partially cleared by wholesale spring firing before settlers are allowed to go upon them. Incidentally such controlled firing would be a protection to adjacent commercial timber.

Prisoners, unemployed and perhaps war internes might be used to chop the fire lanes necessary to lead spring fires through the green bush. Bulldozers might be employed.

Settlement should be co-ordinated with steel extension.

Homesteading should be abolished, squatting forbidden, and settlement strictly confined to reasonably clear lands reasonably close to present or immediately prospective transportation routes.

The quarter sections should be auctioned in blocks with due stipulations to prevent speculation, with a substantial down payment and with the remainder of the price amortized. Prompt residence and steady improvement should be demanded.

Shoestring pioneering should be discouraged.

Power breaking of a proportion of the cleared bush land in advance of settlement is worth considering.

Group settlement by race or religion, while holding certain advantages, is debatable for national reasons, but rearrangement to bring neighbors close together is worth considering.

| Date Due | | |
|----------|------------|--|
| RUTH | 0 5 81 | |
| APR 14 | RETURN | |
| DUE RUTH | APR 30 82 | |
| SEP 22 | RETURN | |
| RUTH | NOV - 8 82 | |
| NOV 04 | RETURN | |
| DUE RUTH | JAN 29 83 | |
| JAN 29 | RETURN | |
| DUE RUTH | DEC 03 85 | |
| NOV 21 | RETURN | |
| DUE RUTH | MAR 31 86 | |
| MAR 28 | RETURN | |
| DUE RUTH | NOV 25 87 | |
| DEC 05 | RETURN | |
| DUE RUTH | MAR 30 88 | |
| MAR 30 | RETURN | |

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